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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the teaching of reading and writing, especially in the early years. The paper argues that if educators cut through the detail of much convergent and some discrepant research findings it is possible to uncover an integrated picture of how children's reading and writing skills develop, and how this development can be promoted. The paper contains three sections: first, it discusses three reasons for the continued debate and controversy about the teaching of reading and writing that seem to obscure the task of identifying effective literacy teaching and learning practices and reaching some common ground; second, it considers three issues that need to be acknowledged and sorted out to be able to discuss generalizable findings on effective practice; and third, it provides a summary of some common findings about effective literacy teaching and learning practices that have been reported recently. The paper concludes with a call for early literacy educators to take a more conciliatory approach that acknowledges points of agreement as well as areas of disagreement, and to adapt their teaching to the needs of specific children. (Contains 26 references.) (NKA)

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Raising the White Flag in the Reading Wars

by Alison Jacob

Paper presented at the Joint National Conference of the Australian Association for the Teaching of English and the Australian Literacy Educators' Association (Hobart Tasmania Australia, 12-15 July 2001)

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A. Jacob

RAISING THE WHITE FLAG IN THE READING WARS

A. Jacob

INTRODUCTION

I want to talk this afternoon about the teaching of reading and writing, especially in the early years. I will argue that if we cut through the detail of much convergent and some discrepant research findings it is possible to uncover an integrated picture of how children's reading and writing skills develop, and how this development can be promoted.

Let me emphasise right from the beginning that this does not mean that I think there is an identical mix of interventions that will work for all children, on the contrary, if I have learned anything from working with children and teachers in the past 24 years it is that effective teachers are able to craft a customised mix of teaching practices for the children they work with. But it does mean that there is, I think, a common menu of materials, strategies and environments from which effective teachers make a choice. This in turn means that our most important challenge is to make sure that our teachers have access to these tools and the knowledge required to use them well.

Granted, I will be looking at this subject from the ideological bias resulting from my background and experience. I should make it clear that I am speaking as an individual and that what I have to say is not necessarily the position of the Department or Government. Those of you who read the brief biographical details in the program will no doubt have already reached your own conclusions about the likely understandings I have of literacy because of my work as a psychologist and special education teacher and my current position as a policy writer and bureaucrat. I have no illusions about the influence of my background and training. I agree with the view that:

Any authors no matter how carefully they attempt to review a field with impartiality and rigor are unable to shake off the effects of their own personal history and ideology. This does not mean that it is futile to make the attempt but that in these post-modern times it can be helpful to acknowledge that a review of research is bound to be idiosyncratic, (Collin Harrison, 2000, 17):

Of course I have been affected by my experience as a school guidance officer, special education teacher, and policy writer where I have worked with students at risk of learning to read and write successfully and been involved with children who, for a variety of reasons are on the edge of success. I have seen the consequences of this failure of the school system in terms of the high personal cost and social inequities that are perpetuated.

I can well remember a bright eight year old student at Oatlands District High, my first posting as a guidance officer who had could not read or write and paid his younger brother 10 cents a page to read to him, and was immensely frustrated by his difficulty – he later drowned himself in the farm dam.

More recently, I was speaking to the principal of one of our district high schools who expressed a deep personal commitment to ensuring that all children in the early childhood part of the school learned to read and write successfully. He pointed to a group of grade nine students in the school who were all unable to read and write and who had developed extreme social and behavioural problems in the school and in the wider community as a consequence. At the age of fifteen this group of kids was virtually being written off within their country community. The principals was convinced that their failure to read and write was a major reason for their dysfunction and determined it would not happen to any other group of students coming through the school.

A week or so ago I spent a morning at an alternative education program that has been established in a youth street centre in Hobart for young people who had dropped out of school. In most cases these students were also coping with a number of personal and social issues including homelessness, pregnancy, drug and alcohol abuse and involvement in crime – in fact 12 of the 14 enrolments had spend some time in the Ashley Youth Detention Centre. In nearly all cases, these young people said that their lack of ability to read and write had greatly contributed to their lack of opportunities and their dysfunctional life circumstances. And yes, this type of experience has affected my perspective on the importance of literacy.

You also need to understand that there have been other areas of my professional life where I found that children were capable of learning if the teaching was appropriately focused to their needs. I spent about ten years working with children and young people with profound intellectual disabilities, including those who had spend their entire lives in the back wards of a large residential institution. The assumption was that they were incapable of learning and this excuse had been used to justify their entire lack of educational opportunities. The truth was that our ways of approaching teaching for this population were incompetent! By changing the way we taught, the children were able to learn and a whole new world opened up for them. A valuable lesson!

Concern has been expressed recently by some members of ALEA that Tasmania was becoming known as the Special Education State in relation to our position in relation to teaching literacy. The implication was that my special education experiences were being too influential and this was seen as a definite negative in an area where some tension has always existed between special educators and their regular education colleagues. By making my ideological frame and experience explicit I am alerting you to this personal bias that will undoubtedly be evident in this paper, but also explaining why my experience has led me to believe that it is absolutely imperative that as many children as possible learn to read and write to a level that allows them to improve their life chances and contribute to personal fulfilment. I hope it will also be clear why we as professionals must pool our knowledge, understandings and resources and make this happen. I don't think it is being melodramatic or overstating the case to say that children's lives are at stake!

In this paper, three is the magic number! There are three sections to the paper.

1. Firstly I will discuss three reasons for the continued debate and controversy about the teaching of reading and writing that I think obscure the task of identifying effective literacy teaching and learning practices and reaching some common ground.
2. Secondly, I will consider three issues that I found I needed to acknowledge and sort out in my own mind in order to feel comfortable with discussing generalisable findings on effective practice, and I suspect they are issues that concern a great many other people as well.
3. Thirdly, I will provide a summary of some common findings about effective literacy teaching and learning practices that have been reported recently and then provide you with some much needed respite from my voice by showing you some video clips illustrating some of these findings in Tasmanian classrooms. I have been helped in this task by having the opportunity to visit schools that were state finalists of the National Literacy Week Awards in the past month or so, and this gave me the chance to reflect on what I saw in relation to the findings that have been reported . While I know that these awards are sometimes frowned upon as a political publicity stunt, from my perspective it was a welcome opportunity to visit some good schools and discuss the teaching and learning that is occurring there with teachers, parents and children who are justifiably proud of what is being achieved.

SECTION ONE

Three reasons for literacy continuing to generate discussion

I'll start with what I think are three reasons for literacy continuing to generate discussion and comment. They are: the popularist nature of literacy debate, the different philosophical and ideological backgrounds that people bring to the debate; and the multiple constructions of meaning attributed to the term 'literacy'

- Firstly, for many people, particularly the man in the street, controversy about literacy has become almost a 'code' for other concerns and anxieties about education generally. Debate about approaches to literacy often encapsulates debate about issues such as the values and purposes of schooling, the place of assessment and reporting and the relative merits of various pedagogical approaches. This ensures that there is plenty to discuss.

  In particular, the standard of literacy has come to be a relatively tangible demonstration of more general educational standards:

  > *One of the ways in which we assess an education system is by looking at children's standards of literacy and numeracy at various stages of their schooling. The Age*, 20.6.01

This is particularly so since quantitative values are frequently assigned to levels of literacy attainment in the form of scores and test results, that are not possible to provide in relation to other areas of learning. Consequently, literacy has attracted a high level of political and media interest, with figures about declining standards being a constant theme.

Most recently in Australia this has been manifest in statements from politicians and educational commentators about testing and 'benchmarking' with claims and counterclaims about 'standards' and percentages of students who fail to meet standards. One popular perspective is that this testing and reporting against benchmarks provides the public with evidence of 'the true state of affairs' that teachers and education systems have been attempting to suppress:

> *Parents are now finding out the truth about whether schools are teaching their children how to read and write to an acceptable standard' the Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs Dr David Kemp said today.'* (Media release 22 February 2000)

A similar perspective is advanced in an article interestingly entitled *Code of Silence – public reporting of school performance* from the right-wing *Centre for Independent Studies* that argues for public release of literacy results at school level because:

> Such information could empower the community to do something about an under performing school…leaving the public in the dark can lead to suspicion and a lack of support for the education system for which it pays. (Rich, 2000, p.6)

The monitoring and reporting of literacy data has thus become, in the minds of some commentators and the media at least, a way of making public the general standard of education and revealing potential inadequacies that it is implied that school authorities have tried to suppress through their 'conspiracy of

silence'.

This use of data on literacy standards has unfortunately had a very negative effect on genuine efforts to use literacy test data to improve educational decision-making. Many teachers would agree with Kenneth Goodman who is recently quoted in The Australian as saying:

> *What we are doing is turning our schools into drill camps for testing. We've turned wonderful teachers into technicians. We have brought the morality of politics into educational decision-making.* (Kenneth Goodman, in *The Australian,* 30.6.01)

By politicising discussion on standards of literacy attainment and burying this discussion in a more general debate on educational standards and school performance, it has become almost impossible to have an impartial professional discussion among teachers on assessment, monitoring and reporting of literacy attainment.

- A second reason for continued debate is that literacy can be conceptualised from any number of different perspectives and paradigms, involving numerous disciplines and sub-disciplines. Consequently, debate about literacy often reflects the fact that people have come to the subject from their different philosophical and professional backgrounds with any common ground frequently masked by their different sets of referents. I have already acknowledged the influence of my psychology and special education background.

It is true that Psychologists clearly dominated early research and continue to exert a substantial influence with a positivist conceptualisation of reading and writing being that of the cognitive processes involved in making sense of written text. This research ranges from highly reductionist work on brain chemistry and perceptual processes to broader work on the perceived sets of psychological skills that enable people to decipher the writing system or systems they need to use.

During the 1980s a new view began to emerge that reading was not simply the single product of interaction with text, but a process of cognitive construction. This view was based on the observation that in responding to text, readers must construct their own meaning that will vary according to their idiosyncratic social and ideological experience.

The significant incursions into the field of reading by linguists and cultural theorists resulted in reading being interpreted in terms of critical theory as well as in the context of the politics of the time. There was recognition that reading and writing take place in particular contexts, for particular purposes and as part of social relationships and social practice. Reading researchers also began to draw from sociology and anthropology and so the concept of literacy took on social, cultural and multi-cultural dimensions.

There was also recognition that literacy was part of a wider social, political, cultural and economic pattern that shaped schooling according to the predominant power and ideology of the time and an acknowledgement that discussion of literacy will necessarily involve discussion of socio political contexts and understanding of the distribution of power as much as theoretical and pedagogical considerations.

Another difference in conceptualisation of reading and writing that has had a marked influence on debate is the difference between understanding reading from the perspective of beginning readers or from the experience of the more experienced adult readers. Clearly the processes of making meaning in both cases may be quite different. A great deal of effort can be wasted in applying the perspective of an experienced adult reader to what may be happening with beginning readers.

Arguing from different perspectives or conceptual frameworks can be very useful and allows a variety of paradigms to make a contribution. It is particularly unhelpful, however, when colleagues take a stance that proponents of these different paradigms cannot even talk to each other – that insurmountable barriers exist between them that are so fundamental that conversation is literally impossible (Stanovich, 2000, 374).

I remember speaking with a teacher about the visual processing difficulties experienced by many dyslexic students and the implications of that these physiological abnormalities on these students' processing of print. She responded by saying that her conceptualisation of literacy was much more sophisticated than a paradigm that viewed reading as a perceptual process and therefore she found this body of research irrelevant to her work as a teacher.

I'm sure that we are all guilty of ignoring discussion that does not fit our belief systems and understandings, as to do otherwise is too uncomfortable and upsetting to our sense of equilibrium. Unfortunately, the number of different perspectives involved in discussion about literacy ensures that standoffs occur far too frequently.

A third reason for continuing literacy debate is confusion about the multiple constructions of meaning attributed to the word 'literacy'. Since the Romans first used the term, literacy has had at least two distinct meanings:

i. the ability to read and write on the one hand, and

ii. the broader sense of being educated, on the other.

In recent years the word literacy has been further stretched with growing appreciation of the multiple nature of literacy and the diversity of applications that are possible. This evolution is obviously a central theme of this conference. Literacy has been linked by adjectives to form compounds like computer literacy, historical literacy, musical literacy, workplace literacy and political literacy. In addition, numeracy is often closely liked with and subsumed within literacy. For example, the national literacy plan is in fact a literacy and numeracy plan.

Many of the capabilities and skills of more general teaching and learning have at some time been incorporated under broader definitions of literacy. These include the ability to think, critically analyse, make judgements, negotiate, solve problems and appreciate the subtleties, joys and purposes of written and oral language. Reading and writing cannot easily be separated from these broader aspects of learning. Thus, it is not possible to focus on reading and writing without constantly clarifying and making connections with higher order capabilities.

For many people, the term 'literacy' is therefore closer to 'knowledge and understanding' of a particular area of content, than to the narrower concept of literacy as a process of gaining meaning from ink on paper.

> However, is still necessary for children to learn the foundational 'literacy' skills needed to decipher the writing system or systems and then:
>
> > Once learned, these skills can be applied and extended in a variety of ways which might come into the broader definition of literacy (Oakhill and Beard, 1999)

Unfortunately, the expanded conceptualisation of 'literacy' and compound 'literacies' leaves writers without an alternative word for 'learning the foundational elements' that doesn't imply a 'back to the basics' model. It also causes some confusion about the role of learning to read and write in the broader conceptualisation of being literate, and again, fuels the continuing debate.

High level of emotionalism and passion about the literacy

In addition to these three reasons for literacy continuing to generate discussion, it should also be acknowledged that the emotionalism and passion surrounding debate on literacy is difficult to exaggerate. Those involved in the field, and particularly those that have taken a minority perspective at particular times, have consistently reported the personal and social consequences that this involved. For example, Marilyn Adams reflected that having written *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning about Print:*

I was told I would be shot…for having written this book I have variously been described as being a nazi, a behaviourist, a right-wing religious fanatic, a child abuser…the book was decried as government-subsidised propaganda and even as the work of the devil'. (Adams, 1999, 215)

As Adams suggests, providing any commentary on literacy, particularly on preferred instructional methods (as Adams did) is a risky business! While it has not quite been necessary for me to ask for danger money to speak today, it is true that several concerns were expressed to the minister's office about the fact that I was on the program with anxiety about what I might say that reflected on the state as a whole. Well meaning colleagues rushed to provide detailed advice on the language to be avoided and the metaphors that were forbidden. Warnings on what I should and should not say abounded! The Fawlty Towers '*don't mention the war!*' analogy was a little too close to the bone! What they meant was that my use of language would do a great deal to either alienate or involve my audience as well as providing the signifiers by which my construction of the concept of literacy would be interpreted, and in this sense their advice was both timely and useful. But I have spoken at many national and even international conferences and this has never happened before. What is it about literacy that causes people to be so sensitive to what other people will think?

I should emphasise that I would not want to discourage the level continued fiery and concentrated debate, which the above issues fuel. It is entirely proper to examine our knowledge base and discuss the conceptual understandings. Especially if this can happen without prejudice! Wider explorations and expositions should certainly be promoted. As the editors of the *Handbook of Reading Research*, volume 3 (2000) (all 1000m pages!) enthuse:

Our task as reading researchers remains one of continuing to create new frontiers of thought, keeping the verges open for all who are willing and imaginative enough to undertake the exploration. And in the process of creating confusion, we will ever have the opportunity to discern the broader underlying pattern of our shared chaos' (Preface).

This not only reflects current post-modern sensibilities and is also, no doubt, the secret behind selling thick books about reading research at five-year intervals! However, I can only wonder if the proliferations of 'verges' has contributed to what Gage described as a 'counsel of despair' (Gaffney and Anderson, 2000, 73) from teachers and parents who really do want to understand and apply some common findings about teaching and learning.

There is also a sense I think, in which we all become involved in an elaborate game of 'The Emperor's New Clothes' trying to make sense of the whole issue of teaching reading and writing that has simply become too complicated and too multi-layered, for the average teacher or parent to keep up with. We

don't want to be the only one revealed as being so unsophisticated and out of step that we can't see how our teaching and learning practices relates to some of the complex and rich theoretical paradigms that we read and hear about, so we keep quiet and retreat to the privacy of our own classroom where we continue to teach in the way that we have always done and allow the debate to continue around us. We don't want to be the first one to say, 'but wait a minute, some kids are not learning' or 'this is not working' so it is easier to say nothing and keep our heads down.

I am not for one minute suggesting that there are simple answers to these questions about literacy. It reminds me of one my favourite quotes:

For every complex question there is a simple answer. And it is wrong. (H.L. Meiklin)

However, maybe we are making the whole issue overwhelmingly complicated. This makes it difficult to distil the powerful but simple messages that are capable of being held in our heads at one time. From my perspective, as I emphasised at the beginning, there is a remarkable level of consensus behind different paradigms as well as room for different views to be accommodated without compromising people's underlying principles and values. There is a large body of developing and evolving shared understandings that have served to refine and strengthen the way that we conceptualise literacy. I also think that deliberate, almost mischievous misunderstandings about, and polarisation of, various perspectives on literacy, and particularly the place of phonemic teaching, have benefited no-one. As the editor of Kappan wrote over a decade ago:

The two camps of zealots – the phonics advocates and the anti-phonics advocates – have jumped into the fray. Each camp has drawn its wagons into a circle and refused to budge. In such standoffs there are no winners. And the children are the losers. (Editorial, Phi delta Kappan, 1989)

I am certainly not the first to suggest it is time for both camps to raise the white flag, surrender and then reconsider what we know, understand and believe about literacy and literacy education. This is not to imply that the philosophy and the approach behind the various strategies does not matter, but that at the end of the day, some common findings about effective teaching and learning practice do emerge. As you have detected, I keep returning to this central theme.

SECTION TWO

Before identifying these common findings, however, it may be useful to look in more depth at some of the issues that I found I needed to reflect on before reaching that point. These issues are:

1. The value and appropriateness of scientific research to inquiry about literacy;
2. The relationship between literacy and social justice and equity issues; and
3. The arguments that occur because of associations between beliefs that link them together.

1. Conceptualisation of the research and inquiry that we bring to literacy

A fundamental issue for all teachers is the place of scientific research in relation to the inquiries about literacy and literacy teaching. There has been a lot of coverage recently to what purports to be the application of scientific research to studying different methods of teaching literacy. For example, an article in *The Australian* in the past fortnight quotes Reid Lyon who has just been given $5 billion over five years to be spent on research-proven approaches for reading instruction as saying:

Teaching children to read is a lot like curing a deadly disease – first scientists must identify promising approaches, then they need to test their hunches...We are trying to instil scientific method into reading instruction instead of allowing philosophy to guide the debate. (*The Australian*, 30.6.01)

As a side issue, many critics would say that this is a classic example of using political power to selectively undertake research and then to report it in the name of science. There is a widely held belief at present that politicians and policy makers have:

funded selective research that most closely supports their view of what constitutes the best reading-instruction agenda. And in part they have accomplished this by organising research panels that tend to promote their view. (Kamil et al p.xii)

The number of 'expert panels' constituted to look at 'scientific' research in literacy in the past few years makes it difficult to avoid the accusation that reporting of research has been tainted. While scientific research is always open to the influence of the source of funding, and should be assumed to be selective and biased to some degree there is particular reason for concern in relation to many recent reviews of research in relation to literacy when the amounts of funding are so high and when the potential political influence of the recommendations is so great. I believe that as professionals we have only ourselves to blame for the literacy research agenda being taken out of our hands. By making the discussion about alternative teaching and learning practices too obscure and diverse and facilitating what is almost an industry of continued controversy, policy makers and Governments have not unreasonably intervened to try and make sense of the issues.

However, to return to the issue of whether a scientific approach is applicable to the study of literacy, there must first be some attempt to define what is meant by 'scientific method'.

Snow, Burns and Griffin (1998) in their review of the literature on preventing reading difficulties in young children, describe their conceptualisation of the scientific method as being based on three principles:

1. It aims for knowledge that is publicly verifiable by methods such as replication or peer review;

2. It employs methods of systematic empiricalism such as being derived from observation or experiment; and

3. It seeks testable theories, being those that are potentially falsifiable.

The scientific method based on these premises has been undoubtedly successful in many areas related to human biology and functioning.

However, many professionals, including teachers and academics, deny the relevance of any scientific research base in relation to literacy, arguing that that the nature of literacy, as for other complex human behaviour, does not make it amenable to 'scientific investigation' and the kind of principles described above.

People with such a belief system will see my attempts to draw together some commonalities describing effective practice as stemming from an outmoded positivist paradigm that is inappropriate as a way of gaining knowledge and developing understandings about literacy. Their denial of the relevance of scientific research is often part of a more general rejection of a modernist belief in a logical and ordered universe. The post-modern reaction to loss of faith in modernism resulted in rejection of the possibility of certain knowledge and a celebration of the diverse and ephemeral along with

*'The total acceptance of fragmentation, discontinuity and the chaotic' (*Polkinghorne, 148)

Post-modernist epistemology emphasises three basic themes:

- The first is the subjectivity of our observations and the impossibility of separating our observation from reality. This means that we can have no sure foundation upon which knowledge can be built as experiences are always filtered through interpretive filters. It is therefore not possible to identify generalisable truths about such things as effective practice as reality is always 'tainted' by our subjective interpretation of what we observe. It is certainly true that different people's observations of the same film, the same lecture, the same conference, and the same classroom are likely to reflect their differences as people. For example, when I show you some video clips in a minute I have no doubt that you will see different things.

- The second is an emphasis on the differences and uniqueness of disparate events and experiences and a denial of any regularities or commonalities. This view means that there can be no generalisable principles of effective practice as truths are seen to be always contingent, transient and context bound. I think that we have certainly learned the validity of this statement in work over the past few years on school improvement and the importance of a particular school context making it very difficult to transfer a model from one school to another.

- The third is a belief that all knowledge is internally constructed such that our evolving knowledge is not the tracking of an independently existing world, but that internally constructed knowledge literally *is* the world. If we all construct our own worlds, there is no external reality to study and therefore no generalisible truths beyond each individual's belief system. Debate on this belief has, of course, occurred for centuries and I won't attempt to synthesise the arguments for and against which I remember occupied a considerable part of Philosophy courses when I was at Uni.

All of these themes are important and post modernist thinking has provided timely challenges to the relevance of scientific method in relation to literacy.

I emphasis, however, that a post-modern conceptualisation of the world does not mean that we cannot use methods based on scientific principles in our enquiries and attempts to seek understanding, but that we do so without the level of certainty within modernist assumptions about a rational and ordered universe.

A post-modern sensibility of the world can be well accommodated in most current conceptualisations of scientific research on literacy. I don't think I am alone in believing that knowledge is usually a combination of what we experience or verify and the meaning that we construct within the frames of our particular individual beliefs and values.

Despite the lack of certainty and the subjective, transient and interpretive nature of our understandings there is still much to be gained from following the at least some of the basic principles of a scientific method. This means being critical of some research on literacy that claims to be scientific but does not show any commitment to public verification, testable theories and empirical methods. I find it frustrating, for example, that some such 'scientific research' has been given a high profile and wide dissemination through media reports and has often gained popular acceptance and led to adoption of 'quick fix' solutions that have lacked any credibility. The intersection of optometry with learning difficulties and the popularity of such things as Irlen lenses is a good example.

However, we should acknowledge that there are numerous caveats that need to be kept in mind when undertaking any rigorous enquiry in relation to literacy. These include:

- Science cannot claim certain knowledge or laws
- Multiple methods will be needed to suit different circumstances
- Naturalistic studies, case studies and qualitative methods can all be helpful, as well as any quantitative data and information from controlled laboratory studies
- Experimental manipulation is usually less than complete
- Untreated control groups are almost impossible to establish
- Different contexts must always be taken into account
- Some variables cannot be manipulated for ethical or practical reasons

As one prominent advocate for the use of research in relation to literacy concludes:

If teachers want a conceptualisation that recognises that observation is theory laden and takes this into account, that is tentative in its knowledge claims, that recognises its inherent fallibility, that recognises that phenomena are conditioned by contexts, that uses a plethora of methods, and whose methods can be employed outside the laboratory as well as in, then modern science fits the bill exactly (2000, 373).

Clearly, the view of what constitutes scientific research in relation to literacy is shifting. The authors of *The Impact of Educational Research – the Educational Research Program in Australia (2000)* comment that the type of research being reported in relation to literacy shows considerable '*methodological and conceptual advances*':

There has been an increase in both interpretive and participatory research, a decline in large-scale quantitative studies and more small highly focused qualitative studies (P11)

with growing recognition that the relationship between research and practice is a:

multi-layered, unpredictable, interacting process of engagement between the researcher and the educator (p.11)

There has also been a perceptible shift in teacher's perception of the value of educational research. Where as an Australian report (*Strategic Review of Research in Australia)* in 1992 commented that there was a perception among teachers that much educational research was irrelevant to them, a report in May this year suggests a growing expectation that policy shifts be supported by research. The report concluded that:

There is extensive evidence that research, through direct involvement and indirect means, has an influence on individual educators.

However, the extent of this influence depended upon:

Individual attitudes and beliefs and organisational cultures and structures in the promotion of research usage (p.7)

This report also identified strong support from many teachers for becoming involved in research in their own settings. This has certainly been evident in Tasmania where schools have indicated strong interest for being involved in our IBIS (Initiatives Based in Schools) program where the department has provided funding for schools to undertake their own research on a number of issues involving literacy. Some of

these research projects have proved very successful, while others have shown difficulties in the application of a research method at school level with inadequate support and guidance. All in all, these initiatives have sent a strong message that school based research is important and valued by the department, and perhaps this is in itself a significant contribution.

However, there are still teachers who refuse to acknowledge the relevance of any scientific research in relation to literacy, whether school based or not. Such a stance means that any comparative studies of different approaches can be denied because of a belief that epistemological differences cannot be treated as pedagogical methods that are subject to empirical analysis. Some *Whole Language* advocates are indignant that:

Rather than being accepted by the educational establishment as an alternative and/or oppositional theoretical stance on learning, whole language came to be defined as a method... Defining whole language as a method allows researchers to apply principles of scientific testing to what is in truth a complex socio-political process...and to declare scientifically that whole language does not work. (Wolfe and Poynor, 2001, 16)

This position means it is possible for a teacher to justify ignoring any data that points to effective practice, especially if it does not fit their belief system. For example, Kenneth Goodman is quoted in the *Australian* article referred to earlier as saying:

'Even if it were true that there was scientific evidence that one method was superior to others, you can't force teachers to teach in ways that they don't believe in, that they feel is harmful to kids'

It could be suggested that it is more likely to be 'harmful to kids' for teachers to ignore scientific evidence on effective teaching and learning practices. I simply don't think that such a stance is either professionally defensible or philosophically sound and evidences a misinterpretation of both modernist and post-modernist epistemologies. Surely the varying contributions of both positivist and post-positivist methodologies should be valued given an appropriate level of rigor and trustworthiness of the investigation being undertaken.

2. Relationships between literacy and political dimensions surrounding equity and social justice issues

The second issue that I want to discuss concerns the relationship of literacy to social inequities between different social and cultural groups. The perpetual relationship is a circular one with social and economic disadvantage being associated with lower literacy attainment that is in turn associated with further socio-economic disadvantage.

The contribution of literacy attainment to future social and cultural inequities and the life chances of students has been well documented. For example, the Dusseldorp Skills Forum in 1998 concluded:

> A longitudinal study of Australia's youth has shown that students' skills in literacy and numeracy are more important than anything else in respect to their future educational and employment success. Literacy and numeracy skills are a better predictor of employment prospects, completion of schooling and entry to university than a students' period of eduction, socio-economic background or type of school attended.

A similar result was found in Tasmania's study of post compulsory education in 1998. In this study, the destination and post compulsory education destination for all students who were in year 10 in 1995 were

traced.

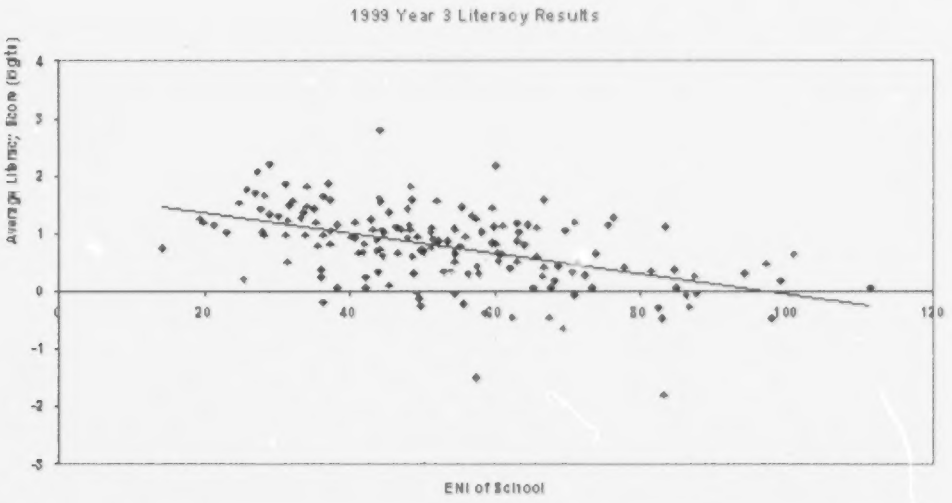
The study concluded:

Entry to higher education is strongly related to literacy and numeracy skills. Even where the effects of social background, type of school attended and place of residence are controlled, having strong number and word skills significantly increases the likelihood of obtaining a tertiary entrance score and gaining entry to university.

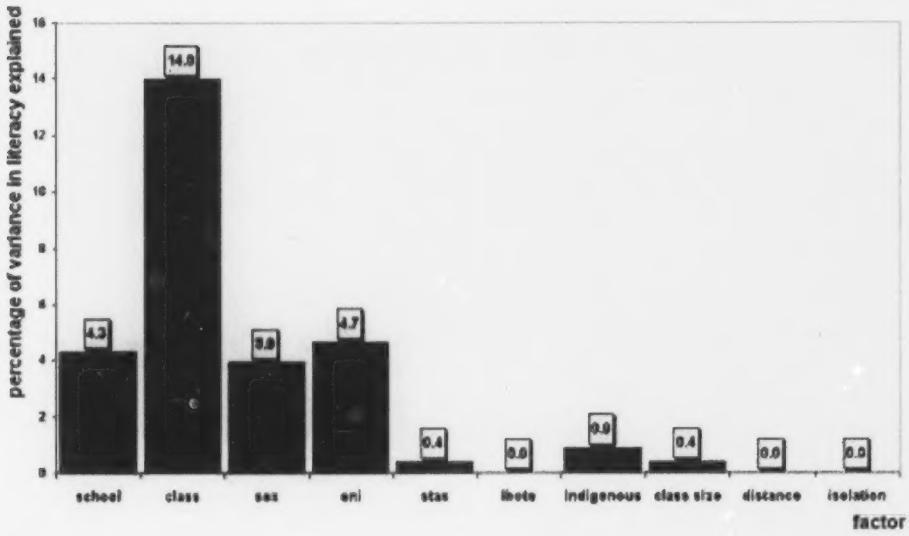
The contribution of socio-economic level and student to determining students' literacy attainment in the first place is also well documented, with students from background of low social and economic status consistently performing at a lower level. I remember hearing Brian Cambourne comment on *Four Corners* that if he knew the postcode for a school he could predict their literacy results.

This relationship can be illustrated by this scatter graph of the relationship between "Needs Index" in Tasmanian schools and their year three literacy results. The needs index runs from left to right: schools with the lowest needs index to the left are those with the least number of students from disadvantaged circumstances. If there was a perfect relationship between the needs index and students' overall literacy performance, the schools average literacy scores would fit on the line of best fit. It can be seen that the school scores certainly do cluster around this line, indicating this relationship between literacy attainment and socio-economic disadvantage.

However, while there is a strong correlation, it is by no means a perfect one. It is obvious that some schools with a high needs index are in fact doing better than schools with less students from deprived circumstances.



It is also probable that the effect of socio-economic circumstances depends on interaction with other factors. An analysis undertaken by our Office for Educational Review this year showed that the effect of socio-economic variables was not nearly as pronounced as the class in which the student was being taught, and particularly their teacher.



It is therefore evident that socio-economic status in itself does not have an unalterable effect on student's success in literacy. It may be the way that teaching strategies are influenced by teachers' perceptions of socio-economic considerations that perpetuates further inequities. As Luke and his colleagues have articulately argued literacy teaching is based on moral, political and cultural decision making that can result in including or excluding particular groups of students:

In many school systems, the unequal distribution of kinds and levels of literacy practice and skill are used to include and exclude students from credentials and ultimately occupational and life outcomes….Literacy education, then, always has been about difference and power, about teaching members of communities and nations to 'be' different kinds of literate citizens with stratified access to social institutions….The different kind of literacies provided for communities of learners tend to reflect, rather than erase, Australian social difference and cultural diversity. (Green, Hodgens and Luke, 1994, 5)

The most common assumption is that a 'skills based' approach to teaching reading and writing disadvantages socially marginalised groups because skill based activities that bear no relationship to the cultural experiences of minority social groups make learning difficult for these children. To learn to read and write, children must first understand what it means to read and write, and must believe that they would like to do so. Reading and writing must be seen as purposeful, meaningful activities that are of value in their own lives and the lives of others in their community. For many children entering school this understanding is sadly lacking. In addition, it is argued that secondary cultural discontinuities such as low motivation caused by uninteresting and disengaging reading materials and low educational aspirations about their capacity for critical thinking and reflection that limit the performance of many of these students.

While this is certainly apparent, it is also true that attempts to compensate for the lack of rich language experiences and early literacy opportunities that have been lacking for many students from disadvantaged homes may be totally inappropriate. It has been estimated that some children have the benefit of between 2,000 and 4,000 hours of experiences of print before they come to school. Even with the best of intentions it will never be possible to make this time up. It is also apparent that using teaching approaches that assume this earlier experience, will be unlikely to be successful for significant numbers of children.

However, when approaches that work well with middle class children fail more disadvantaged children,

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we tend to blame them, not our teaching! We point to their lack of books at home, their lack of experiences of print, their poor understanding of the purpose of reading and writing, their lack of role models and so on. If only they had the appropriate pre-requisite experiences and skills, we lament, then how successful our teaching would be! It doesn't take much commonsense to turn this around and recognise that maybe our teaching strategies are an inappropriate match for some students.

It may be more helpful to plan teaching and learning strategies for marginalised children that recognise the realities of the classroom situation and provides specifically focused learning activities that may be of most benefit. Some children simply will require more explicit teaching and more focused intervention in order that they reach a level of success:

In schools where low-income students are beating the odds, teachers have created programs that recognise the need for differentiation – one size does not fit all when it comes to beginning reading instruction. (Hiebert and Pearson, 2000, 141)

I am aware that this line of argument has often been attacked for signalling lowered teacher expectation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Concern is expressed that using skills based sequences of teaching methods for these students, implies that they are incapable of benefiting from good literature and activities involving higher order thinking, and of providing critical responses to texts. Some people will see this as perpetuating the class divide discussed above by selective use of kinds of literacy practice.

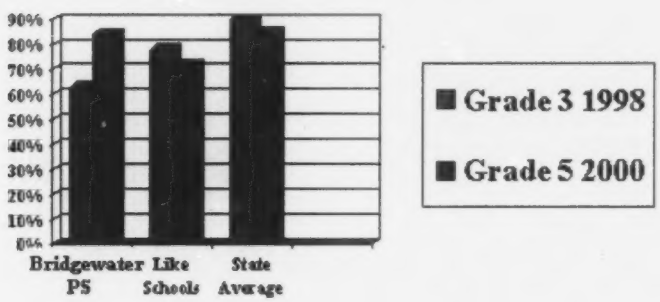
Again, I don't think that this is true. Recognition that some students require more structured scaffolding, more explicit teaching of pre-requisite skills, and more frequent practice so that they can attain a level of success that then allows them to apply their skills to authentic and creative literacy activities, is simply recognition of their needs and a way of ensuring their chance for success.

I am reminded of a quote from Jean Blackburn, one of the original members of the Schools Commission who was particularly concerned about the role of schools in improving the life chances of socially disadvantaged students:

The most effective contribution that schools can make to a more socially just society falls within their distinctive responsibility for learning. They cannot decisively change socially disadvantaged aspects of their students' lives beyond school. But they can become more powerful in ensuring that, at all stages of schooling, the maximum proportion of students, irrespective of social background, achieve sufficiently well in commonly important learnings to participate successfully at a higher stage. (Blackburn, 1989, 9)

The following graph illustrating the relative amount of variance that could be accorded to different factors suggests to me that some teachers use teaching methods and classroom interventions that are more successful than others in relation to the group of students with whom they are working.

I could give you several examples of schools in areas of socio-economic disadvantage that have adapted their teaching methods to the needs of the students they are teaching, with evident success. One such example is Bridgewater primary school that I visited recently. Through a concentrated effort and specific tailoring of their strategies to the needs of their school population, this school has turned around their average level of attainment in literacy, despite the disadvantaged socio-economic clientele of the school.



We all know schools where similar results have been recorded. Surely this means that educators who have a true belief in fostering a more equitable Australian society will make sure that they use whatever strategies and interventions are needed to ensure the maximum number of children learn to read and write successfully?

3. Trial by association and the 'tyranny of "or"'

The final issue that needs to be 'sorted' in my mind is the need to ensure that propositions about how literacy and particularly how children learn to read are not accepted simply because of their association with other appealing or accepted beliefs. At the same time, a method should not be rejected because of negative associations. For example, a 'whole language' approach is commonly associated with:

(a) Teacher empowerment and decision making

(b) Child centred instruction

(c) Integration of reading and writing

(d) Authentic reading and writing tasks

(e) A view that children are naturally disposed towards written language acquisition, and

(f) A disavowal of the value of systematic phonics instruction

It is probably only in relation to the last two points that there would be disagreement with advocates of an approach that emphasises the alphabetic principle and systematic phonics instruction. Yet somehow, a skills based approach has been painted as at odds with *all* of the above propositions.

By the process of association, it is implied that if you support a skills based approach you are automatically opposed to things such as teacher empowerment, child centred instruction, the integration of reading and writing and authentic reading and writing.

Conversely it has been implied that if you accept the first four propositions you are unable to also include systematic phonics instruction.

A further implication of this problem of associations is what was referred to in a book on sustainable enterprises I was reading recently (Collins and Porras, 1994) as *the tyranny of "or"*. This 'tyranny' pushes people to believe that things must be either A OR B, but *not both*. Thus it is asserted that you can believe in quality children's literature OR levelled texts, but not both. You can believe in authentic reading and writing tasks OR provide explicit skills teaching, but not both. You can be child centred OR

plan for focused intentional teaching time, but not both. Need I go on?

One way in which some people have tried to ensure that this type of polarisation does not occur, is to advocate balance between approaches. The problem with this, as Collins and Porras point out is that balance implies going to the midpoint, doing everything fifty-fifty or half and half and that this is not evident in individuals who reject "The tyranny of or". These people apply seemingly contradictory strategies based on what they believe to be effective *to an extreme* in both directions! Irrational? Perhaps, but as F.Scott Fitzgerald pointed out:

> *The test of a first rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function* (Quoted in Collins and Porras, 1994, 45)

I was interested that Catherine Snow makes the same point in the addition to the preface for the third printing of Preventing *Reading Difficulties in Young Children.* She comments that the review committee's position had been presented as one endorsing 'balance' between phonics and whole language. She goes on:

> Balance is *not* the right metaphor to carry our message, and we certainly did not suggest an approach that involved 'a little of this and a little of that' 'Balance could mean splitting one's time evenly across activities designed to practice the alphabetic principle and activities designed to support comprehension. 'Integration' means precisely that the opportunities to learn these two aspects of skilled reading should be going on at the same time, in the context of the same activities and that the choice of instructional activities should be part of an overall, coherent approach to supporting literacy development, not a haphazard selection from unrelated, though varied activities (viii).

This is exactly what good teachers of literacy are able to do!

SECTION THREE

Is there any hope of reconciliation within the competing paradigms?

We return then to the issue of whether it is possible for there to be any reconciliation between competing paradigms and whether it is possible to identify some common elements of effective practice.

Stanovich suggests that there is a way to resolve 'the war', if both sides agree to a five step strategy:

1. First look at the points of agreement between opposing positions
2. When doing so, invoke a spirit of charity whereby all sides are encouraged to stretch their principles to the maximum to accommodate components of the other position
3. Step back and take a look at what might be a greater degree of agreement than anyone supposed.
4. Next, isolate the crucial differences and try to make these few in number but clearly defined
5. Take a look at the defining differences and ask whether they are worth the cost of the war.

If we follow this strategy it is really not difficult to demonstrate that there is more agreement on elements of effective practice than is commonly supposed.

As Stanovich comments:

> It is inconceivable that we will continue wasting energy on the reading wars simply because we cannot get both sides to say simultaneously 'some teachers overdo phonics' and some children need explicit instruction in alphabetic coding. (2000, 398)

Having I warned you of my paradigm bias at the beginning, I urge you to apply the spirit of charity described above in the meaning that I have derived from my reading of some recent reviews of research. I have also no doubt been influenced by some of the classrooms that I have visited recently, and I would like to take a few moments to show some quick grabs of what was happening in these classrooms. I think there is often a shared recognition of effective classroom practice although we may each see what is happening in these classrooms through different lenses.

Different methods and strategies

It will come as no surprise to know that in the schools and classrooms that illustrated the above examples of effective strategies there was a wide variety of methods and philosophical approaches including classrooms that could be described as using a whole language approach, the Reading Recovery method, PASS (that was modelled on the Victorian *Early Literacy Research Project*) and the Spalding method.

These classrooms illustrate many of the elements that have also been identified in the following research reports.

1. *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (National Research Council, 1998) - a review from a panel appointed at the request of the American National Research Council to review evidence on the prevention of reading difficulties among young children
2. *Teaching Children to Read – an evidence based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction* (1998) - a review from the National Reading Panel, convened by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development regarded as more narrowly conceived and the subject of considerable criticism because of its method of selecting studies to be reported.
3. *National Literacy Strategy- Review of Research and other related evidence* - undertaken in Britain by Roger Beard to inform the National Literacy strategy.
4. *Success for All* program (more recently called Roots and Wings), associated with Robert Slavin which is directed at students at risk in over thirty American states
5. *Early Literacy Research Project: Elements of an Effective Literacy Strategy* conducted by Peter Hill and Carmel Crevola in Victorian schools and the model on which the Tasmanian *Program of Additional Structure and Support (PASS)* was based
6. *Learning to Read in the Early Primary Years* - a comparison of four approaches to early years literacy (*First Steps, The Early Years Program, the Children's Literacy Success* Strategy and other approved school designed programs. This report was published earlier this year
7. The seventh report was an evaluation of the Tasmanian Flying Start Program

It is possible to group the factors that these various publications identified under the following headings:

- School organisation and leadership
- Teachers

- Classroom organisation
- Home and community partnerships
- Monitoring and assessment
- Teaching and learning practises

The factors associated with student success in these various reports were as follows:

School Organisation and leadership

- Whole school commitment to improvement;
- Adaptation of established programs and models to particular school contexts rather than attempting to 're-invent the wheel' from scratch;
- A whole school plan for effective 'first wave teaching' that benefits all students, as well as a plan for students who require additional efforts;
- Provision for a strong foundation for literacy in early childhood years;
- Early intervention programs for students who have not made expected progress after one year at school;
- Data based decision making that is used to guide whole school decisions in relation to literacy programs;
- Purposeful and informed leadership by the principal and senior staff and coordination of literacy programs by high profile senior staff;
- Providing opportunities for teachers to share practices and and plan future interventions; and
- Fostering risk taking and innovation.

Teachers

- Teacher enthusiasm, knowledge base, experience and commitment to the school's literacy program;
- High teacher expectations for student success;
- The availability of intensive pre-service training in teaching literacy;
- Continued in-service professional learning and establishment of professional learning teams; and
- Being explicit about their thinking and planning.

Classroom organisation

- The provision of dedicated time to focus on literacy teaching;
- Attention to ways in which students are grouped within class and between classes; and
- Availability of a range of texts and other resources covering different genres and incorporating the textual practices required in the present and future economies student will experience.

Home-community factors

- Support to parents before children start school; and
- Home-school partnerships and planned home-school liaison.

Monitoring and assessment

- Processes in place to identify students at risk as early as possible;
- The use of benchmark standards and explicit targets that are specific, meaningful and actually

influence teaching strategies on a day to day basis;
- Keeping detailed and systematic ongoing profiles of student progress;
- Giving constructive feedback and encouragement; and
- Regular reporting to students and parents and at school and system level.

Approach to teaching and learning

- Recognition that reading outcomes are determined by complex and multi-faceted factors;
- Promotion of reading for enjoyment and engagement in a variety of purposeful literacy activities;
- Planned teaching sequences to meet student needs;
- A strong oral language focus with an emphasis on phonological awareness is needed in early years;
- Systematic phonics instruction for children in early childhood and primary classes;
- Vocabulary building that is appropriate to the age and ability of the students;
- Promotion of comprehension by actively building linguistic and conceptual knowledge in a rich variety of domains as well as intentional teaching of comprehension strategies;
- Modelling reading and writing;
- An approach beyond the initial level that includes:
    - Helping students develop a working knowledge of how sounds are represented alphabetically;
    - Providing opportunities for sufficient practice to achieve fluency with different kinds of texts;
    - Ways to increase background knowledge to render written texts meaningful and interesting;
    - Providing control over procedures or monitoring comprehension and correcting mistakes; and
    - Keeping students motivated and interested so that they want to read for a variety of purposes.
- For students who have more difficulty:
    - Explicit teaching of meta-cognitive strategies and teacher modelling of explicit strategies;
    - Explicit teaching of spelling and writing;
    - Additional scaffolding support;
    - Regular monitoring and feedback on progress;
    - Extended practice in application of taught strategies; and
    - Explicit teacher directed instruction on spelling and writing.

No doubt you will have found some agreement and some disagreement with various elements of this synthesis, but I think there is sufficient congruence in the elements to justify my belief that we can identify common factors that contribute to successful planning for literacy outcomes for most students.

When people review research, they typically end their reviews by suggesting that 'much more research in needed on this topic'. I am sure that much more inquiry and discussion in relation to literacy will always be interesting and help stretch our thinking and meaning making and we will continue to evolve our views accordingly. However, it seems to me that there is a much more urgent need to acknowledge the knowledge and understandings that have already been conceptualised from a variety of perspectives. I hope it is also evident that when I talk about raising the white flag in the reading wars I am not talking about surrender from any particular side or perspective, but the need for all of us who are involved with early literacy to take a more conciliatory approach that acknowledges points of agreement as well as areas of disagreement and adapt our teaching to the needs of specific children.

It is appropriate to finish by returning to Bridgewater Primary and letting Kevin have the last say. It is obvious from this clip that from being a child who had difficulty with reading and writing, Kevin's

recent successful attainment of reading and writing skills have given him enormous joy and satisfaction. This skill and understanding will provide him not only with improved life chances socially and economically, but access to cultural pursuits, leisure and recreational activities and the pleasure of reading and writing that might not otherwise have been available to him. When we consider the high stakes that we as teachers are playing with when we make decisions about literacy teaching and learning, in terms of the lives of little blokes like Kevin, it is obvious that it is absolutely essential to commit to this truce.

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